

DISTRACTIONS FROM GOD'S ECONOMY

At the inception of the Christian era, the Christians' witness of a pro-active God whose will, pleasure, purpose, and plan are altogether involved with man collided with the pagan Greek mindset. Unlike the mythological deities, who were believed to have set the world in motion in order to be entertained by it, and who rarely intervened in human affairs except to exact revenge on offending mortals, God has focused and predicated the accomplishment of His eternal desire and intention upon the cooperation of and union with His creatures created in His image.

Like the ancient Greek mythological ideation, modern minds also tend to consign the Judeo-Christian God to heaven, largely regarding Him as a benevolent type of grandfather who is on call to expedite their pursuit of a happy life and the accomplishment of their dreams—a God who otherwise dispassionately observes the world from above as it pursues its own objectives. However, the Bible also collides with this superficial modern perspective by presenting God as One who has invested His entire interest and goal in the uncoerced willingness of human beings to appropriate His will as their own. This purposeful God is so thoroughly occupied and in love with His creatures that to some extent He relies upon their voluntary cooperation for the accomplishment of His will. Correspondingly, the central theme of the Bible is the unfurling of God's highest intention as well as the means of its accomplishment in partnership with man. The intent of this article is to briefly outline God's will and the means of its accomplishment, and then to point out the most notable contemporary distractions which lead believers astray from co-laboring with God according to His highest intention.

God's Will and Good Pleasure

In teaching us how to pray, the Lord Jesus impressed on us the fact that there is a unique *will* of God—"Your will be done, as in heaven, so also on earth" (Matt. 6:10). This phrase provides a window into the ongoing spiritual battle over the extension and replication of God's will on earth as it is in heaven. The execution of God's will is

something which requires prayer; this implies that God's will is undergoing resistance from opposing forces.

Ephesians 1:5 marvelously reveals a crucial aspect of God's will: that we are called to participate in "sonship"—that is, that we become sons of God both in the divine life and in legal status. God has predestinated us to become so thoroughly saturated with the Son of God that we are transformed and conformed to His image (Rom. 12:2; 2 Cor. 3:18; Rom. 8:29), making Christ the Firstborn among many brothers.

Ephesians 1:5 speaks of "the good pleasure of His will," and verse 9 tells us that God's making His will known to us is "according to His good pleasure." Sonship is not only God's will; it is also His pleasure, His heart's delight. Human beings were created with an innate desire to seek joy and pleasure, a desire which mirrors the Creator's ability to possess a "good pleasure." God's chief delight, what gives Him the utmost pleasure, is to transform fallen sinners into a new creation in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17), thus making His only Begotten the "Firstborn among many brothers" (Rom. 8:29). Transforming sinners into sons is not God's judicial obligation; it is the delight of His intrinsic being.

God's Purpose and Plan

We have seen that God has a will and that His will is His good pleasure. Ephesians 1:9 further explains that God purposed the good pleasure of His will "*in Himself*." A mystery is apparent here. On one hand, man's partnership and voluntary participation are necessary for the accomplishment of God's will. On the other hand, God has purposed His will in Himself, and, hence, is Himself its origination, its initiation, and its sphere. In other words, for His eternal will God seeks to win man's compliance, to attract man into a divine joint venture; at the same time, He also has ensured the accomplishment of His will by purposing it in Himself so that nothing can thwart it. The God revealed in the Bible is a God of infinite resolve and determination, having a will, an intention, which He has purposed in Himself. And paramount within His will is His desire for many sons as a mass reproduction of His

only begotten Son (cf. John 12:24), a desire so central to His heart that He purposed it in the highest way possible—in Himself.

Ephesians 1:10 continues the unveiling of this purposeful God. First, we are told that God has a will, that this will is His good pleasure, and that this delight of God's heart has been purposed in Himself (v. 9). It follows that, after purposing, God would form a plan for the accomplishment of His purpose. Verse 11 calls this plan "the counsel of His will," His consideration of the means to accomplish His intention. Paul also uses a peculiar Greek term, *oikonomia*, in verse 10 to identify God's plan, that is, His economy: "the *economy* of the fullness of the times, to head up all things in Christ" (cf. 3:2, 9; Col. 1:25; 1 Cor. 9:17; and 1 Tim. 1:4). *Oikonomia* literally means house law, household management or administration, administrative dispensation, plan, or economy. As the Father of His universal household, God has planned to dispense Himself as the abundant divine life (John 10:10) to all His household members, the church, in order to constitute them into organic members of the Body of Christ, vitally attached to one another (Eph. 4:16), blent together as one "bread" (1 Cor. 10:17; 12:24), and built up as God's expanded and enlarged expression (Col. 2:19; Rev. 21:2, 10-11). Yet such a lofty and sublime design is not without opposition, for its ultimate consummation signals the defeat and destruction of another, His foe.

God's Enemy

Revelation 12:9 refers to God's enemy as "the great dragon...the ancient serpent, he who is called the Devil and Satan." *Devil* means accuser and slanderer, and *Satan* means adversary. This evil one is God's enemy, who abhors God's good pleasure. Furthermore, the fulfilling of God's good pleasure corresponds to the execution of God's judgment on Satan, when he will be thrust into the abyss and ultimately into the lake of fire (19:20; 20:3, 10). It is therefore logical to assume that God's enemy would be driven to frustrate the fulfillment of God's economy. Much like a man on death row, Satan engages in his tactics with a single aim—to postpone the consummation of God's purpose by distracting mankind, especially believers, from realizing and participating in God's economy, because the carrying out of God's plan means his defeat.

We believers, therefore, should be vigilantly on guard that we not be distracted in our Christian living and service from God's eternal economy, His plan to accomplish His purposed will. Paul warns the believers in 2 Corinthians 11:3 that the serpent who "deceived Eve by his craftiness"

could also corrupt them from their standing as a "pure virgin to Christ" (v. 2). Undoubtedly, our eternal destiny is secure in Christ, being the free gift of God (Rom. 6:23). However, it is possible to squander our brief earthly pilgrimage, being led away through Satan's deception and craftiness. While most believers are aware of the snares of sin and evil, few realize that religious pursuits and "spiritual" activities can also usurp our time and energy, distracting us from the central purpose of God. There are many religious distractions which can frustrate the believers' participation in God's economy.

Christian Ethics and Law-keeping

An ethical and moral standard based upon the teachings of Christ and the Old Testament law would doubtless rank among the highest found in the world. Just as certainly, the pursuit of a lifestyle in harmony with such ethical teachings could hardly be condemned as evil. There is nothing wrong with either God's law or with the desire to fulfill God's law, nor is it erroneous to seek to fulfill God's righteous demands. The question here is not what is good or evil but what will fulfill God's eternal purpose and carry out His eternal economy. The apostle Paul addresses this very question in Romans 7 and 8. Romans 7 is devoted to illustrating the folly of trying by the natural life to fulfill God's righteous requirements found in the canonical law. After pronouncing wretchedness on the man attempting to please God in this way, Paul uses the following chapter to unveil God's eternal economy, which produces the many glorified sons of God (8:29-30). Romans 8:4 tells us that "the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the spirit." The focus of the believer's pursuit, then, should not be law-keeping but a walk in the spirit. Galatians 5:16 gives us succinct instructions: "Walk by the Spirit and you shall by no means fulfill the lust of the flesh." If we struggle against the flesh, our defeat is inevitable. Conversely, if we walk in, by, and according to the Spirit in our spirit, we spontaneously, effortlessly, often even unconsciously fulfill the requirements of the law and nullify the impulses of the flesh. It is a walk in the Spirit that fulfills God's eternal economy because the indwelling Christ is living in and through the believers. Christian law-keepers ask, "What would Jesus do?" A Christian in God's economy says, "It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me" (Gal. 2:20).

THE FOCUS
OF THE BELIEVER'S
PURSUIT SHOULD NOT BE
LAW-KEEPING BUT A WALK
IN THE SPIRIT.

Christian Psychology

A corollary to such efforts at law-keeping is so-called Christian psychology. While apparently well-intentioned, Christian psychology often is simply the

“Christianization” of secular psychological notions and practices. Such methods frequently employ a program similar to those found in secular rehabilitation institutions. After tossing in a few verses and Christian principles, the program is pronounced Christian and biblical. Such literature usually encourages believers to “manage” their weaknesses and gain control over them. But even if some believers succeed at times in managing their weaknesses, this success cannot fulfill God’s economy. God’s intention is to have many sons whose intrinsic constitution is permeated with the pneumatic Christ, not many followers whose behavior is simply well-adjusted. God’s ultimate goal is not, for example, “anger control,” but rather, a soul transformed by the inward working of the indwelling Spirit. God’s plan is not to gain men of moderation but God-men; it is not even to produce men *like* Christ, but rather, men who are the actual *replication* of Christ by means of organic conformation to His image. God intends to *transform* the believer’s soul, not *reform* it. Hence, to live according to Christian psychology is actually to misaim in one’s Christian pilgrimage. A person living according to Christian psychology asks, “Lord, help me overcome my weaknesses.” A person in God’s economy prays, “Lord, use my weaknesses as opportunities to speed up the transformation of my soul.”

Entertainment Disguised as Worship

In John 4:23-24 the Lord Jesus signaled a major shift in God’s economy, from an outward worship to one in spirit and in truth. Nevertheless, over the past few decades, forms of entertainment such as Christian dramas, vocal and instrumental concerts, a variety of secular musical styles, and dynamic speaker/entertainers have arisen in reaction to the lifeless forms, rituals, and “orders of worship.” Facilities for worship are often constructed like theaters, complete with stages, lighting, and the latest sound systems and technology. Every chair is oriented toward the performance stage, and those in the audience often sing along, applaud, and cheer, giving glory to the performers who humbly declare, “Glory to God” and “Praise Jesus!” While meaningless rituals and mechanical, formulaic services scarcely qualify as real worship in spirit, neither do “shows” featuring Christian rap, punk, country, rock, pop, magic, comedy, weight-lifting, or other attractions. According to John 4, God considers true worship to be our drinking of Him as the living water. Real worship is contacting God who is Spirit in our regenerated human spirit, enjoying Him as the river of water of life. Such worship fulfills God’s economy because it brings the believer into genuine contact with and participation in God. This worship may touch the believer’s emotions, but its goal is

not emotional excitement—its goal is to satisfy God by increasing His element within His believers. A person who “worships” by participating in Christian entertainment may hope for good performers. A person in God’s economy draws water from the wells of salvation by contacting God in the spirit and being enriched with God’s element.

Doctrinal and Biblical Knowledge

The apostle Paul left no room for doubt concerning the role of knowledge in God’s economy: “Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up” (1 Cor. 8:1). We cannot dismiss this “knowledge” as a reference to vain Greek philosophy or Jewish myths. Instead, Paul was referring to a legitimate question facing early New Testament believers; that is, whether Christians should eat meat sacrificed to idols. In the same fashion, contemporary believers have often been divided over such matters as whether to play musical instruments in Christian meetings, construct windows in church buildings, drink wine or grape juice at the Lord’s table, baptize in river water or any water, require women to wear head coverings, long hair, or both, use the King James Version or modern translations, and so on.

In pointing out the uselessness of knowledge (1 Cor. 13:8), I do not mean that believers should be ignorant of scriptural truth. The Bible tells us, “Buy truth, and do not sell it” (Prov. 23:23); we should therefore endeavor to have an accurate understanding of the Bible. However, there is a critical difference between truth and knowledge. Real truth is not mere mental apprehension, but is revelation as a result of God’s shining. It is the removing of the veil covering us to allow us to see something of God’s economy, of the central truths vital to the fulfilling of God’s eternal purpose. Ultimately, truth is Christ Himself (John 14:6). Therefore, real revelation, a genuine knowing of the truth, unfailingly brings us into an enhanced communion with the person of Christ, a deepened organic union with Him, thereby enriching us with His life and nature, enabling us to minister Him to others and thereby build up His Body. The antithesis of pride-producing, division-inducing knowledge is life-imparting, Body-building love. This love is God Himself, the One in whom we believers abide (1 John 4:16). God’s love is integrally related to His life, that is, He has manifested His love to us by sending us His Son that “we might have life and live through Him” (v. 9). God’s intention in loving us is that we may share and participate in His life, the life which builds the church (Eph. 2:21-22). Vain knowledge, even if concerned with biblical issues, produces schisms. The love of God—which is God Himself as love—dispensed to us as life builds the church.

REAL WORSHIP
IS CONTACTING GOD
WHO IS SPIRIT
IN OUR REGENERATED
HUMAN SPIRIT.

A person excited by knowledge and distracted from Christ prays for more knowledge and tends to be concerned with doctrinal right and wrong. A person in God's economy prays for more revelation in order to accumulate more of the reality of Christ in his intrinsic constitution, affording him the riches of Christ's person to share with others.

Signs and Wonders

It is undeniably true that signs and wonders are referred to and recorded in the Bible. It is also true that God is just as capable today as He was in biblical times of producing "wonders and signs" (Acts 2:22). Nonetheless, the Bible never encourages us to seek signs and wonders, but it does repeatedly enjoin God's people to "seek Him with all their heart" (Psa. 119:2). Further, the Bible never explains how to experience signs and wonders. In fact, whenever these did occur, they were completely unexpected, often surprising the participants, as happened to Peter on the housetop (Acts 10:9-17). However, the Bible *does* explain to us in detail how to experience Christ. Indeed, the revelation of Christ's person and work, along with the believer's experience of all that Christ is, has, and has accomplished, is the central theme of the New Testament. To seek signs and wonders as experiences in themselves is to miss "every spiritual blessing in the heavenlies in Christ" (Eph. 1:3). The Christian experience is not a series of events; it is a person—the Lord Jesus. A seeker of signs and wonders prays, "Lord, grant us miracles!" A participant in God's economy prays, "Lord Jesus, You are my all in all. I simply need more of You!"

Outward Forms, Rituals, and Liturgies

While many modern believers have grown weary of lifeless, traditional forms, rituals, liturgies, and orders of worship, others, in pursuit of "orthodoxy" and spiritual stability, have fled to them. Having experienced an abundance of Christian entertainment services or signs and wonders performances, they have ceased to be thrilled and now long to be fed with solid meat. When Christians who have wearied of repetitiously singing "God is awesome" survey the array of worship "styles" available, certain ceremonious liturgies and rituals often appeal to them as being more solemn and sophisticated.

Undoubtedly, Christian gatherings and corporate worship play a key role in fulfilling God's economy (Heb. 10:25). Yet the New Testament provides us very few details related to Christian meetings. Since the Lord chose to leave us no clear "order of

worship," we are divinely compelled to gather together simply "in spirit and truthfulness" (John 4:24). Liturgies, outward forms and rituals, and orders of worship came into being when Christians abandoned their personal responsibility to be "in spirit" (Rev. 1:10). When each Christian prayerfully gathers with others in spirit, each member of the Body of Christ is living and functioning, and Christ as the Head of the Body directs the meeting as He sees fit. The Christian gathering will then exhibit Christ, convincing unbelieving guests, building up the members, and satisfying the Father.

Gifts and the Second Blessing

When a repentant sinner receives the Savior, he intuitively knows that Christ is worthy of his lifelong pursuit. The loving sinner feels constrained by the love of Christ to give his life to the One who shed His precious blood to purchase him (2 Cor. 5:14). However, because God's people have been distracted from His economy, many soon realize that although they are saved, there is a lack in their Christian walk. This makes them easy prey for those peddling the unbiblical notion that Christians need a *second* blessing.

Ephesians 1:3 tells us that *every* spiritual blessing is in Christ. Similarly, Philippians 3:8 tells us that our life's pursuit should be to "gain Christ." Even more comprehensively, Colossians 3:11 tells us that "Christ is all and in all." First John 5:12 also tells us pointedly that "he who has the *Son* has the life." As believers, we realize that our real blessing, our gain, our life, and our all in all is a wonderful person—Jesus Christ. To claim that after receiving Christ there is the need of another, different, blessing is to misdirect the believers' seeking, distracting them from finding their true portion in Christ. This so-called second blessing is often even referred to as an "it." To seek an *it* instead of *Him* is to be led away from God's eternal economy, for God's entire purpose and plan is in, with, through, and by the person of Christ.

I surely do not deny the presence of miraculous gifts or the experience of the power of the Holy Spirit in today's Christian and church life. As we focus our pursuit on knowing and experiencing Christ, He may choose to bestow on us certain gifts and experiences of the power and authority of the Holy Spirit. The New Testament, however,

only has a few passing references to the miraculous gifts—and in one of them, 1 Corinthians 12, Paul is actually adjusting the Corinthians' overemphasis of these gifts. Clearly, the miraculous gifts (such as physical healing and speaking in tongues) are biblical, but they occupy only a

TO CLAIM THAT AFTER
RECEIVING CHRIST THERE
IS THE NEED OF A DIFFERENT
BLESSING IS TO MISDIRECT
THE BELIEVERS.

small part of the New Testament. The Bible is first and foremost a revelation of Christ in His person, work, accomplishments, and intention. The Scriptures testify of Christ (Luke 24:27; John 5:39); thus, we should proportionately emphasize what the Bible emphasizes.

End-time Prophecies and Sensationalism

With the approach of the year 2000, Christian authors have inundated Christian bookstores with a deluge of books on countdowns, meltdowns, Y2K crisis theories, and end-time prophecies. It is not uncommon to meet believers whose idea of fellowship is a monologue on world events, government conspiracies, Middle East geopolitics, or dubious interpretations of the symbols in the book of Revelation. Such sensationalism is a distraction from God's economy. There is no question that believers should be watchful and ready for Christ's second coming (1 Pet. 4:7; Luke 12:35-38; Matt. 24:42); the question instead is *how*. The New Testament teaches us to prepare for the Lord's *second* advent by co-laboring with Him to fulfill the purpose of His *first* advent. In other words, by daily experiencing the Lord Jesus as our life and as our all in all and by co-laboring with Him to build up His Body, we safeguard our standing within the central lane of His economy, aligning our life and service with His unique and ultimate goal. If we consecrate ourselves absolutely to His purpose and plan, we surely will be watchful and ready for His second coming. It is much like a high school student who seeks to be valedictorian. His graduation is assumed and assured. Since he is seeking such a high goal, no one doubts that he will be ready for graduation—it is a given. Likewise, when believers endeavor to subjectively and experientially know Christ and labor to build up the church as His organic Body, which consummates as the New Jerusalem, their watchfulness for His return is assured. A believer living according to God's economy is also rescued from the marketing hype of publishers seeking to cash in on the new millennium. People caught up in end-time hysteria view the world (and the Lord's return, for that matter) as driven by external events, dictated by and subservient to the looming fulfillment of "interpretations" of biblical prophecies. Conversely, a person in God's economy recognizes that all the prophetic fulfillments are subservient to and driven by the progress and accomplishment of God's eternal economy.

Going to Heaven

God's eternal purpose is not centered on heaven, and the goal of God's economy is not to fill heaven with forgiven sinners. Rather, God's eternal economy is that He would grow and mature

within His redeemed ones, transforming them into the image of Christ, building them up as precious stones to be a spiritual house, consummating in the New Jerusalem which descends "out of heaven from God" (Rev. 21:2). The New Jerusalem, as the building of God with man and man with God, will exist eternally not in heaven but on the new earth. From Genesis to Revelation, God's plan is focused and fulfilled on the earth. The Lord Jesus in fact was conveying His heart's desire to us when He taught the disciples to pray, "Your kingdom come; Your will be done, as in heaven, so also on earth" (Matt. 6:10).

Regardless of God's expressed interest with man on the earth, many of God's children have been lulled to sleep by the idea that redemption alone satisfies God's eternal purpose. Many believers, at least subconsciously, esteem redemption and heaven as their—and God's—ultimate goal. Having been assured of their salvation, they go about their pursuit of a clean, ethical, God-fearing Christian life, all the while failing to fulfill God's intention on earth. A believer whose notion of God's purpose is a heaven filled with forgiven sinners looks forward to dying so that in heaven God's intention with him can be accomplished. He has given up on the earth, except for trying to save some others on his way to heaven. But a Christian in God's economy treasures his earthly journey, seeing each day as being filled with God-ordained opportunities for God's economy to be fulfilled, which will hasten the Lord's appearing and ultimately consummate the New Jerusalem.

The Gospel of Prosperity

Paul warned the Galatians, "If anyone announces to you a gospel beyond that which you have received, let him be accursed" (1:9). Paul was speaking of a mutated gospel, the genuine gospel adulterated and corrupted with a teaching foreign to the New Testament (in this case, law-keeping)—a gospel encompassing the biblical, but having gone *beyond* the Bible! Over the last three decades some modern Christian circles have likewise gone beyond the gospel revealed through the apostles. Such preachers of prosperity often encourage their audiences to take out their wallets, get a \$100 bill in hand, and "sow the seed" in the offering plate being passed. They spend much of their messages explaining how God will financially bless Christians for giving. They often tell believers that they are "sons of the King," and that kings' sons should be rich and not live as paupers. Relying on a few selected verses, they assure naive but willing believers that God intends to make them wealthy, if they will only faithfully contribute to a certain ministry. These teachers thus divert many sincere

GOD'S ETERNAL PURPOSE
IS NOT CENTERED ON
HEAVEN, AND HIS GOAL IS
NOT TO FILL HEAVEN WITH
FORGIVEN SINNERS.

Christians from God's economy by exhorting them to set their hearts and energy on financial success, meanwhile often making the ministers lavishly wealthy. All these seem to have forgotten the Lord's words: "The foxes have holes, and the birds of heaven have roosts, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head....Follow Me" (Matt. 8:20, 22). The Lord's New Testament promise to His followers is spiritual, not financial. God's eternal economy is to dispense the unsearchable riches of His life and nature into His children. God only wants His children in and with Christ. A Christian following the gospel of prosperity seeks riches in the world "for the glory of God," while a Christian in God's economy sees Christ as the unique "treasure in earthen vessels" (2 Cor. 4:7), seeking to be filled ever and only with Him.

Social and Political Causes

Many "ministries" focus on social, political, and legislative issues. It is understandable for believers to be deeply grieved by society's decline into godlessness. It is commendable to pray for those in authority so that we may live peaceful lives. However, there can easily become a compelling temptation to devote time, thought, energy, and effort in attempts to create a God-fearing society. Ironically, devotion to social causes and political agendas can actually delay the one event which will set everything aright—the Lord's coming. The Lord will come only when His bride (the church) has made herself ready (Rev. 19:7). Anything that distracts the church from her preparation to be the counterpart of Christ, which is accomplished uniquely by God's dispensing of His life into His members according to His economy, only prolongs the misery of this fallen earth. The real cure for all social ills is the return of the earth's rightful King along with His kingdom. A person focused on social and/or political agendas may organize or participate in rallies, marches, and phone or letter campaigns, and prays for the success of his cause. A person in God's economy responds to social ills by allowing Christ to live in and through him, thereby enlarging the kingdom of God on the earth and hastening the day of His appearing (2 Pet. 3:12).

A related misconception is known as "reconstructionism." Some believers are distracted by this notion that the kingdom of God hinges on the emergence of multiple "theocracies," world governments which administrate God's law, primarily according to Old Testament law. According to this view, God's purpose is to gradually raise up a generation of future Christian leaders who will bring their governments back to God, thus establishing His kingdom on earth. There is a longing for a return to Calvin's

Geneva, Knox's Scotland, or Puritan America, where Bible law was enforced on believers and unbelievers alike.

Admittedly, it is preferable to have Christians, or at least God-fearing leaders, in authority. Yet however well-intentioned these leaders may be, they can never usher in the visible kingdom of God.

God's kingdom is actually the King Himself enlarging and expanding His expression through His believers. When the King comes, so does the kingdom. When Christ's believers experience Him, then His kingdom, His sphere of ruling, is enlarged. God's eternal economy includes the coming of the kingdom day by day, by means of the daily growth of the King within His people. Ultimately, the Lord's kingdom, a kingdom which shall never pass away, will be visibly established on earth. But the means and the ground for this establishment is the heart of His believers. The King has sown Himself into His believers as a seed. As they remain in God's economy, a crop of Christ is produced within them. The final harvest of this divine crop is the visible manifestation of the kingdom—the reality of which has been growing in a hidden way during the past two millennia within His cooperating believers. The hope and petition of a Christian in reconstructionism is that governmental leaders will turn to theocracy. A Christian in God's economy, realizing that God's kingdom is now developing within him, prays for and allows Christ the King to expand in his heart moment by moment.

Icons, Relic Worship, and Asceticism

Some modern distractions from God's economy can trace their origins to medieval times. Since the early Middle Ages, the worship of images, body parts of martyred believers, fragments of so-called holy sites, and "sacred" emblems, as well as the practice of bodily mortification have persisted. The common justification for the worship of icons is that the less spiritual among the believing community need a physical representation to facilitate their worship. The usual rationale given for relic worship is that the deceased person was so saintly that, years or even centuries after his or her death, divine power continues to emanate from his or her physical members. The customary rationale for asceticism is that bodily mortification restricts the sinful life, thus increasing one's holiness. All

three methods, though revered by some as sacred practices, do nothing to advance the accomplishment of God's eternal economy. In fact, they are more likely to hinder it.

Concerning the worship of icons, it is significant that one

A CHRISTIAN IN GOD'S
ECONOMY ALLOWS CHRIST
THE KING TO EXPAND
IN HIS HEART
MOMENT BY MOMENT.

of the Ten Commandments even forbids the worship of images. Regarding relic worship, it is abominable, morbid superstition to suggest that God's divine power can flow from a decaying corpse or other physical object into a believer. Concerning asceticism, the apostle Paul himself pointed out the uselessness of such a practice. He cautioned the Colossians, "Let no one defraud you" (2:18), and then went on to name asceticism as one such deceit: "Such things indeed have a reputation of wisdom in self-imposed worship and lowliness and severe treatment of the body, but are not of any value against the indulgence of the flesh" (v. 23). A believer who pursues these erroneous practices trusts in outward objects or stern self-control for spirituality. A person in God's economy enjoys the divine dispensing of the Triune God into his being, and by the addition of God, he enjoys His consequent inward transforming work, issuing in genuine spirituality.

Developing Natural Talents and Abilities

In 1 Corinthians 2:14-15, Paul contrasts the spiritual man with what the King James Version calls "the natural man." The Greek word (*psuche*) is actually the adjective form of the English noun *soul*. Translators have struggled with this word, since there is no accepted equivalent in English. G. H. Pember translated it *psychical*, and Andrew Murray more accurately coined the term *soulish*. Paul uses the word to describe a man dominated by the faculties of his soul—the mind, emotion, and will, in contrast to a man led and regulated by the Spirit. He says, "But a soulish man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him and he is not able to know them because they are discerned spiritually" (v. 14).

The God-created soul is certainly capable of enhancing the function of its faculties. For example, man can sharpen his thinking skills and learn to control his emotions. Man is also born with certain attributes and talents that are expressed through the soul. Hence, when a person comes to a saving knowledge of Christ, it is easy for him to long to apply those abilities in his Christian service. Likewise, it is a temptation to direct new believers into various "ministries" according to their natural talents.

In Matthew 25:14-30 the Lord indicates that He has given various numbers of talents to each of His slaves. In biblical times, a talent was a weight measurement of a precious metal used as currency. Because of an unenlightened understanding of this parable, the word *talent* has

come to signify natural ability, the particular capacity of a man's soul. Thus, we may refer to some people as "gifted and talented." But the God-ordained way of God's economy does not rely on the natural abilities of the fallen soul, however well-intentioned. Instead, the Bible points out the need for the soul-life to be denied (Matt. 16:23-25) and for the mind to be renewed (Rom. 12:2). The Bible also tells us that this renewing takes place as we exercise to set our mind on our regenerated human spirit (Eph. 4:23; Rom. 8:6). The apostle Paul also stressed that the soul needs to be transformed and conformed to His image. After learning to live Christ (Phil. 1:21), gain Christ (3:8), magnify Christ (1:20), lay hold of Christ and pursue Christ (3:12), live because of Christ (John 6:57), and deny the natural "I" (Gal. 2:20), the believer is able to serve God in his spirit (Rom. 1:9), in resurrection (Phil. 3:10), and with the uplifted faculties of a renewed and transformed soul. However, a believer who neglects God's economy spends his energy building with wood, grass, and stubble, a work which will not stand at the coming of the Lord (1 Cor. 3:12-14). A believer in God's economy serves God by the resurrection life, in spirit, and with the ability of the Christ-conformed soul, thus building with "gold, silver, precious stones."

Conclusion

The first two chapters of the Bible begin with the tree of life, a watering river, precious materials conveyed by the river, and the absence of Satan. The final two chapters of the Bible similarly end with the tree of life, the river of water of life, precious materials, and the absence of Satan. The difference between these two ends is that the precious materials in the river in Genesis 1 and 2 are built up as the New Jerusalem by Revelation 21 and 22. Thus, the Bible ends with the city of God, a symbol of the Triune God enlarged and expanded in His expression through and with His redeemed, regenerated, and transformed people. It is a building, an incorporation of God in man and man in God, and it is produced by the dispensing of the Triune God into His redeemed ones.

The believers' safeguard against all distractions from God's economy is to take the New Jerusalem as the unique and ultimate goal of their Christian life and service. The Bible reveals the goal of His economy, the New Jerusalem, which is also our goal. The knowledge and vision of our destiny should govern how we spend our energy and effort. We should be vigilant to keep ourselves in God's eternal economy, since it is by this means alone that God will carry out His purpose, according to the desire of His heart. **AC**

WE SHOULD AVOID THE
TEMPTATION TO DIRECT
NEW BELIEVERS INTO
"MINISTRIES" ACCORDING
TO NATURAL TALENT.
